



Legacies of Socialist Solidarity: East Germany in Mozambique

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Book Review

Legacies of Socialist Solidarity: East Germany in Mozambique

by Tanja R. Müller

Lanham, Lexington Books, 2014, 232 pp., \$95.00, ISBN 978-0-7391-7942-0

Economic development plans, dams, bridges, roads and power plants, experimental farms, miracle seeds – all of these are symbols of the great competition between the First and Second World over the decolonising world during the Cold War. They are used as the signals of triumph or the evidence of failure of the respective regimes and their economic ideologies. They are embodiments of the modernising dreams and projections of superiority that characterised the era and shaped the political economy of both camps.

These schemes not only captivated the minds and lives of their proponents, designers, and facilitators, but have also become central to the stories told by researchers. They have dominated publications concerned with the history of development. Significantly, much of the work published in English that discusses the rivalry of the two camps has presented a strong pro-Western bias. Interestingly, however, things have recently begun to change and scholarship concerned with foreign aid is revisiting the past with fresh perspectives (Mark & Slobodian, 2015; Saul, 2005; Westad, 2007).

The work of Tanja R. Müller is a welcome contribution to these debates. Her book *Legacies of Socialist Solidarity: East Germany in Mozambique* (2014) discusses a particularly interesting case: that of the German Democratic Republic's cooperation with the People's Republic of Mozambique in the field of education during the 1980s. The project that she describes does not fit in with the academic and scientific exchanges in higher education that were typical for the Comecon countries. Instead, she looks at the distinctive case of the School of Friendship, a boarding school located near Magdeburg which, between 1982 and 1988, hosted 899 Mozambican children. From a distance – and this is how this project has been evaluated to date – the idea of sending very young children to a foreign country to undertake vocational training and be indoctrinated with socialist ideology sounds like an abuse of power and further proof of the totalising nature of the socialist regime. But through giving voice to those who were at the centre of this project – men and women who studied at the school – and allowing them to reflect on their own experiences, Müller shows that there is a more complex nature to this programme. She successfully moves beyond meta-narratives and macro perspectives and demonstrates how the political agendas of the Cold War, and since, have played out in concrete in the individual lives of those who were at the centre of East-South cooperation. She does not gloss over, but does give a human face to this very controversial initiative, and through that demonstrates the complexities that characterised the relationships of all the people involved in the scheme; the politicians who designed it, parents who volunteered their children for this 'adventure', German teachers and administrators, and most importantly the students themselves.

Müller focuses on legacies that the schooling project had for the people of Mozambique and their later life in their home country. But, for me, the originality and the importance of this book is not in its contribution to studies of the Global South but rather of the Global North, and the history of the Eastern Bloc at large and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) specifically. Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, history has been told from the perspective of the putative victors. Socialist pasts, construed as shameful diversions from 'normality', have mostly been silenced. Although the history of development is rooted in the rivalry of the capitalist and socialist camps, we have undertaken a communal forgetting of this past. The best examples of this are the narratives (dominant in the 2000s) defining contemporary Eastern European aid providers as only 'emerging', and Western players as 'traditional donors'. Such narratives replicate a decades-old competition between the West and the Rest. But this discourse also has implications for the future of international development, as it prioritises Western approaches to foreign aid practice over socialist ones.

Müller does not engage in her book with these contemporary issues; she does not actively consider the meaning of the legacy of a socialist past for the future of international aid, German aid, or European aid. In that sense her book is somewhat conservative. In her own account she admits that coming from West Germany, she was surprised to find out about this unique educational exchange programme, and perhaps even more surprised that it was remembered as *paradise*. For that reason, the starting point for her research does not differ much from other dominant, popular discourses about the East which conceive it as a blank space, lacking creativity and originality, a space dominated by mis-development.

But this book is more than just a story of the past. It is very important evidence of contemporary discussions about European aid, about the right and ability of Eastern European players to propose alternatives to West-

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dominated ideas about development. When such states joined the EU in the early 2000s, they were required to establish Official Development Assistance structures that would replicate OECD/DAC models. They were labelled 'New Donors', and as such were presented as lacking experience and as needing to follow the guidance of the 'mature' – that is Western – donors. These discourses were based on the presumption that until the 1990s Eastern Europe was detached from the world, excluded to the margins. This book is a much-needed counter to these narratives.

Through robust research, and openness to different points of views, Müller has delivered a book which grows into a nuanced and multidimensional study giving a human face to the socialist past of the GDR. This is one of the most valuable contributions of the book. It is a rare example of a researcher's sensitivity, ability to move beyond her own presumptions, and willingness to listen to and be *surprised* by her informants allowing her to deliver a study which counters existing ideas about Eastern development projects and allows for the possibility that not everything socialist was oppressive and unsuccessful. It is paradoxical, and a sign of our globalised times, that although residents of the East have been trying to convey that message for several decades now, evidence from the South – from Mozambicans themselves involved in this project – is necessary in helping to at least raise the possibility of this counter-narrative.

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